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SUBJECT: JORDAN: OES-FUNDED CORAL REEFS SYMPOSIUM BRIDGES  
ARAB-ISRAELI POLITICAL DIVIDE

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: A recent international symposium on coral reefs monitoring, partly funded through an OES grant, brought together scientists from Israel, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, and Iran, among others, to share data and experiences. Despite a tense political climate in the region, science was placed above politics and public interactions among the Arab participants and the Israelis were professional, cooperative, and cordial, although we learned later of some private remarks that were less welcoming of the Israelis. The participants pledged to form an informal information-sharing network and reconvene next year to promote international cooperation on this global, trans-boundary environmental issue. End Summary.

2. (SBU) From June 19-21, the NEA Regional Environment Office, through a \$24,000 grant from OES, co-sponsored the "Middle East Regional Science Symposium and Workshop on Butterflyfish Monitoring," led by NOAA scientist Dr. Michael Crosby, and under the patronage of King Abdullah II. Our partner was the Aqaba Special Economic Zone Authority (ASEZA) Environment Commission, which funded about half of the symposium's cost. The symposium was an outgrowth of an ongoing Middle East Regional Cooperation (MERC) project that has encouraged scientific collaboration between Israeli and Jordanian marine scientists on their shared natural resources in the Gulf of Aqaba during the past few years. Prince Ali, the king's uncle, opened the proceedings of the symposium, lending an official imprimatur and offering the Jordanian government's encouragement to the participants to continue their important regional cooperation.

3. (SBU) The conference underscored the importance of regional cooperation on trans-boundary environmental issues, introduced the butterflyfish monitoring technique, and introduced ASEZA's economic development plans for Aqaba to the foreign participants. During the first day of the symposium, scientists from each of the countries (Jordan, Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Lebanon, Iran, India, Malaysia, South Africa, and the U.S.) presented papers on their respective coral reefs research. The following day comprised workshops on the butterflyfish monitoring technique, data management and sharing, and priorities for future collaborative research and monitoring--all with an eye toward using this technique as an indicator of coral reef change and health. Manuscripts of the research papers presented at the symposium will be published in a supplemental edition of the peer-reviewed "Aquatic Conservation," probably next year.

4. (SBU) In addition to the more formal scientific presentations, students from a local Jordanian school who formed their own community environmental awareness group participated earnestly in the symposium, delivering two short presentations on the state of coral reefs in Aqaba. Working with the local chapter of the Jordan Royal Ecological Diving Center and the Marine Science Station (affiliated with Jordan University and Yarmouk University), the student volunteers regularly assist with beach cleanups and raise public consciousness about the need to protect the local environment through sustainable development.

5. (SBU) An appeal was made by most participants for continuing U.S. funding of this gathering of scientists. It was also suggested by some that the group seek to fund future joint activities through solicitation of support from institutions, foundations, and research grants. All agreed the symposium represented an important first step in developing the kinds of regional networks necessary to protect a shared marine environment.

(NB: No USG funding went to support the Iranian participant, in accordance with ILSA provisions.)

6. (SBU) COMMENT: From the perspective of encouraging regional cooperation through environmental issues, we were pleased to have such a good representation of Arab scientists sitting and working effectively with their Israeli counterparts. The presence of the Saudis, Lebanese, and Bahraini, not to mention the Iranian, spoke to the dedication

these individuals have for their science--something we have historically witnessed in the multilateral working group meetings on the environment and water resources. While it was no surprise that the Jordanian participants, academics from the Marine Science Station who have longstanding collaborative relationships with their neighbors in Eilat, Israel, were at ease, the Egyptian showed a comfort level in dealing with the Israelis that was most welcome in light of some Egyptian official rhetoric about cooperating with Israel.

17. (SBU) We were particularly pleased to learn that many of the Arab scientists had advance knowledge of the Israeli participants and remained committed to attending the symposium. We understand from the organizers at ASEZA, however, that one or two individuals may have dropped out when they learned that Israeli scientists would be present. ASEZA officials confirmed that one Saudi regretted, probably because of personal convictions, and a Yemeni cancelled at the last moment, although it remains unclear if his decision was driven by Israeli participation. A Syrian allegedly missed the symposium because of delays in obtaining official permission from his university and the necessary "exit visa" from the government.

18. (SBU) The Israelis openly identified themselves as such; the Arab scientists engaged them during the symposium proceedings. The interpersonal dynamic on the margins of the conference was animated and positive, with no obvious shunning of the Israelis. That said, we learned later from one attendee that the Saudi scientists confided to him that they were not fully comfortable with the open Israeli participation, although their demeanor did not betray them.

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